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## **Humanist Structuration Theory: Review of Zygmunt Bauman's *Sketches in the Theory of Culture***

Zygmunt Bauman, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*. Edited with a Preface by Dariusz Brzeziński. Translated by Katarzyna Bartoszyńska. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018. 289 pp. 9781509528301, £17.99 pbk

Zygmunt Bauman's work has been categorised in many ways, but it is unlikely 'structuralist anthropology informed by Levi-Strauss and semiotics' has been a common classification. Nevertheless, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, a collection of essays originally due to be published in 1968, encourages us to think in precisely these terms. Bauman's 2016 afterword refers to the book as a key part of 'a "Levi-straussian" period in my thinking, inquiries and writings' the 'indelible traces' of which 'are still easily detected, even in my most recent publications' (p. 251). This text, a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the nature of Bauman's project and a useful source for those interested in theories of culture and the history of sociology in Poland in the 1960s, with especial insights concerning Bauman's humanism and structuration theory.

As discussed by Brzeziński in his preface, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* was due to be published in Poland in 1968. However, come the anti-Semitic purge launched by the Communist government, and Bauman's eventual exile from Poland, its publication was shelved. All copies, including Bauman's which he been forced to handover before leaving Poland, were thought to have been destroyed. But, in 2014 a set of uncorrected proofs were found in a Warsaw library. They had been held, presumably since 1968, in a metal cabinet whose key had been long lost. Based upon this and a set of notes held by the publishers, the original manuscript was recreated, with this edition being the English translation. So, what we have here is, as Brzeziński puts it, one of the more extreme cases of Bauman's claim that academic work can be thought as a 'message in a bottle' (pp. viii-x).

The goal Bauman sets for this text is the creation of a theory of culture which 'allows for an understanding of human actions' which 'would go beyond the closed circle of ethnographic description or empirical statistical generalisation' (p. 1). Part I of the text 'Sign and Culture' deals with developments in anthropology, semiotics and the conception of culture. Part II, 'Culture and Social Structure' then seeks to link this to concerns of social position and structure.

As Bauman discusses in Chapter 1, conceiving of culture as an object relies upon treating other human customs as objects of curiosity. The emergence of anthropology from within the European empires turned this curiosity into a hierarchical notion of cultures. Consequently, ethnography, especially under the inspiration of Malinowski, treated each culture as a distinct system. Bauman instead draws upon Levi-Strauss to see culture as a universal structuring principle which relies upon 'reducing the uncertainties of the world' through the 'transformation of the unpredictable into the necessary' (p. 28). This model of culture, one that makes the world a predictable place, is explored in the next two chapters through the relation to semiotics. In Chapter 2, Bauman argues that 'humanistic' sociology relies upon understanding human action as containing an 'element of randomness' (p. 32) that comes from humans not simply being input=output mechanisms. This is where semiotics is useful since we can understand human behaviour as having an informational element. Those we interact with then interpret this information as the basis for their own action. This ensures some level of predictability but also allows for the possibility of multiple forms of action. This is the outline

of Bauman's structuration theory: while signs help in producing a measure of probability, it is the response of actors to these signs which allow for these probabilities to be reproduced. As Bauman suggests in chapter 3, drawing upon a wide range of zoological data, it is language, 'the exclusive discovery and property of humans' (p. 88), which operates as the primary mechanism for sharing such information.

Chapter 4 argues, based upon a wide reading of ethnographic data, that while the classifications of culture drawn may differ across societies what is universal is some notion of near-far. This is true not only in the relation of 'our' culture versus others but also in regard to the internal differentiation within a culture. In chapter 5, Bauman outlines what a research programme based upon this would look like. Such a researcher is 'an ethnographer, looking to produce empirical generalisations' (p. 122) concerning how information transmitted via verbal and non-verbal signs produces patterns of social action. Given the structuring properties of culture, this requires an awareness of different social positions. As Bauman puts it 'you cannot become an officer by acquiring an officer's uniform' (p. 147) and therefore researchers would need to understand how the information of the sign becomes a legitimate expression of the structure which culture shapes. Cultural stability is assured when there is a one-to-one match between sign and structure, cultural change breaks down this relationship. Therefore, Bauman advocates an ethnographic research agenda which seeks to understand how social action, the derivative on the universal semiotic reading of culture, reproduces the probabilities set by culture as structure and/or contributes to their metamorphosis.

Part II of the book is then devoted to further explorations in the notion of culture as social structure. Chapter 6 opens with Bauman considering the human tendency towards dualistic understandings of the world. He suggests these projections spring from the disjuncture between our own 'will, desire, strivings' which are 'resistant to confrontation with "reality"' (p. 155). Taken to an extreme, such projections create 'a disjunct between the...cultural model and the motive of action' where 'processes of individual accommodation organised by culture' do not create 'structures of thought and behaviour enabling assimilation to the environment', in which case we experience 'alienation' (p. 158). The result of this is either a projection of alternative cultural forms – the realm of art, ideology and utopia – or the 'political-legal manipulation of the human world' (p. 158) – the realm of politics. Consequently, Bauman's claim is that culture not only provides the mechanisms to enable human action, but also enables the possibility of reflection upon conditions which limit action. By imposing structure onto a world which otherwise seems to lack it, culture produces the language and modes of thought in which desires for an alternative can be expressed, most notably, in the form of class conflict (p. 160). Here, and in chapter 8, Bauman also suggests it is part of the role of research to engage with knowledgeable, conscious human actors seeking explanations and solutions for their alienation. As Bauman puts it 'the essence of the socio-cultural process called 'research' is rendering comprehensible for people the bounty of socially acquired experience' (p. 203).

The development of a culture which expresses its discontents via class is the topic of chapter 7. Here Bauman discusses the urbanisation of Polish villages, arguing that statistical discussions of changes in living patterns overlook the qualitative changes in cultural patterns. Most significant – and here Bauman makes his first mention of state socialism in order to downplay its distinctiveness – is the development of a market system for both labour and goods, which opens up relations between the village and the city. The 'externalisation' of the market,

and the creation of labour as a commodity means industrialisation is a common process to all societies, capitalism and socialist.

Similar questions of the relation of capitalist and socialist societies are the subject of the final two chapters. Chapter 9 concerns itself with education, which Bauman argues is undergoing a crisis in Poland due to three factors created by socialism: the expansion of a period of youth; the insistence on one 'right' way of life; and the disconnect between education, with its 'principles of equality and justice' and state socialism with its 'manifestations of indifference to human harm'. Chapter 10 then examines the notion of 'mass culture'. Using explanations that would later become the basis of Bourdieusian cultural sociology he links cultural distinctions to class: 'when I am asked "is cultural good X higher than cultural good Y?", I respond by saying "Is class A, for whom Z is good, higher in the social structure than class B, for whom Y is good?"' (p. 246). These distinctions show the continued role of culture as (class) structure under socialism.

It is hard to ignore the context in which this book was written. Partly this is reflected in its topic matter. In addition to dealing with, at the time, contemporary debates in anthropology, Bauman also makes frequent references to cybernetics and functionalism. This text will therefore hold considerable interest for scholars interested in the debates of 1960s Polish sociology. Of course, the question of context is even more marked when it comes to the politics of the book. It is noticeable that while Bauman frames this book as attempting to combine semiotics with 'a Marxist interpretation of social structure' (p. 1) the actual Marxism is absent beyond generalised claims such as the suggestion that a concern with practice makes a theory 'Marxist' (p. 33). This is indicative of a need to 'namecheck' Marxism when writing under Communism. Given Bauman was writing this text while a figure of political suspicion it is also a remarkably brave book. Not only does it largely eschew Marxism, beyond its veneer of fidelity, it also actively argues against the distinctiveness of socialism and suggests criticisms which would later appear more boldly in Bauman's writings on 'second generation socialism' (Bauman 1972). It was Bauman's ethnicity which made him such a figure of suspicion and hatred in communist Poland of 1968, but this book would have given the anti-Semites seemingly appropriate political cover for their racism. The fact Bauman wrote it is a credit to his courage.

Of course, the publication of this book in English in 2018 makes its potential reception a more difficult matter to assess. Bauman, in his afterword, claims the book was written in conversation with 'culture-ologists' grappling with a notion of culture as process (p. 252). Not only is it difficult to identify a similar school of 'culture-ology' today it is also possible (and here I speak as a non-expert in these fields) that its discussions of structuralist anthropology and semiotics have been superseded by developments in those fields. Instead, I will consider this text for what it might add to Bauman's significant sociological output.

Bauman was once categorised as a theorist who took advantage of a 'right to inconsistency' (Nijhoff 1998) and, in some ways, this text demonstrates this. This is true not only stylistically – this is very much a text written by someone who has 'not yet' become the Zygmunt Bauman sociology would come to know (Tester and Jacobsen 2005:203) – but also in terms of content. No other Bauman text currently available in English, not even *Culture as Praxis* (1973) which covers similar ground, involves this level of engagement with anthropology, especially the empirical findings of ethnography which takes up a significant portion of part I. Therefore, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* opens up the possibility of greater engagement with the

notion of an ‘anthropological’ and/or ‘Levi-Straussian’ Bauman. Also, it is notable, especially from a writer later criticised for neglecting empirical research (Ray 2007), how much Bauman links his project to proposals for a research programme with chapters 5 and 8 both devoted to this.

However, despite these differences, I wish to emphasise the continuity of this text with Bauman’s later work. As already indicated, this text is the earliest we now have in English where Bauman outlines his concern with culture as structure. Culture, as that which structures human choices to make some more predictable than others, while also allowing for critique between the real and the possible, was subsequently a central part of Bauman’s sociology. It can be found in his claims that: culture is ‘is a blunt refusal to the offer of secure animal life’ and ‘a knife with its sharp edge pressed continuously against the future’ (Bauman 1973:136); that the figurations of solid/post/liquid modernity describe the dominant pressures shaping, though not determining, human choices (Bauman 1992:11); and that language, a constitutive feature of human culture, allows for resistance by inscribing ‘the curious particle “no”’ into our praxis (Bauman 1998:17). Furthermore, the claim that communism, ‘Socialism’s younger, hot-headed and impatient brother’ defined itself not by seeking an alternative world, but by seeking to achieve the industrialised promise of capitalism (Bauman 1991:185) is anticipated here.

*Sketches in the Theory of Culture* also provides us with more extensive defences of two other elements of Bauman’s sociology. The first is the question of structure and agency. In an interview published in 2008 Bauman responded to a question on the similarity between his work and that of Giddens by noting he had been speaking of ‘structuration’ before Giddens (Bauman and Haugaard 2008: 115). Indeed, this book indicates what we now call structuration had been in Bauman’s work since the 60s. The second theme is humanism, defined here by some notion of ‘humanity’ as a subject with inalienable traits which are expressed in the inevitable social situation of humans. Here, Bauman is very clear, the value of his perspective is its universalism: the imposing of structure, use of signs and expression of language is a factor of *all* humans (see p. 44). It was this base within some notion of humanism that led to some of Bauman’s later claims, such as the existence of some ‘pre-social’ moral impulse (Bauman 1993) or the hopeful reminder that no social order should be taken as inevitable since ‘what humans have done, humans can undo’ (Bauman and Obirek 2015:44).

To demonstrate both of these themes I would like to end with a quote from *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* which indicates the basis of what we might call Bauman’s humanist structuration theory which any reader of this challenging and engaging book will find hard to miss:

This particularly human way of solving existential problems is based on the fact that humans as a species form societies – in other words, they create their own external conditions, in which humans as individuals are to inscribe their existence. They create these conditions – organising, structuring their world, transforming ‘permanence’, unpredictable homogeneity, into ‘impermanence’, a predictable heterogeneity; according certain possibilities a greater probability than others; rendering the conditions of their own being predictable by the very fact of acting in order to create and preserve them. All of this is accomplished by the human species, narrowing infinite contingency to a finite, economically constructed array of practical possibilities...This particularly human method of solving existential problems is realised through action...The human species is constantly removing the indeterminacy of its world, but

it achieves this by actively organising that world...The human species creates a world suited for apprehending cartographically, and also creates a map of that very kind of world. It is left to individuals to acquire the ability to read that map (pp. 57-58)

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